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When Mommy goes to war (leaving the kids behind)

By Laura Browder

While our culture has always seemed able to cope with the idea of fathers as warriors--think of all those photographs on the front page of your local newspaper, featuring a returning soldier seeing his baby for the first time, or reuniting with older children--we may be less able to handle the idea of deploying mothers. We have learned, through watching countless war movies, that the bonds forged between (male) comrades during war can be stronger than those of family, but it may be a surprise to learn that this is true for many women as well.

As Marine Sgt. Jocelyn Proano, who joined the military after being expelled from high school, told me about getting her deployment orders when her daughter had just turned one year old: "That was the worst ever -- to leave my kid and everything." Yet she found her feelings for her daughter were in conflict with her military training: "The mommy mentality left me as soon as we got on that bus. All of a sudden, the Marine hit me." Sgt. Proano ended up extending her deployment so she would not have to leave her unit: "You want to be a Marine, and you can't be a mom all the time."

Sergeant Proano's overwhelming loyalty to her unit was only one of many surprises I encountered over the course of 52 interviews I did with women soldiers, sailors, coasties, airmen and Marines across the eastern seaboard. Photographer Sascha Pflaeging and I had conceived of our collaboration as a way of hearing the stories and showing the faces of some of the first large cohort of women--over 220,000 as of this writing--who had served in the U.S. military in Iraq, Afghanistan, and surrounding regions. Among many other things, "When Janey Comes Marching Home: Portraits of Women Combat Veterans" ended up being a story about motherhood and war.

Our societal expectation that motherhood should be the overwhelming force in any woman's life was conspicuously absent for many women I spoke with. Police Capt. Odetta Johnson, an Army reservist, still regretted that she had had to cut her deployment a month or two short in order to return to her young son, who was facing surgery. She described her family's pressure on her to come back and her disappointment at letting down the members of her unit. Single mother Lt. Col. Willa Townes, U.S. Army Reserves, was deployed when her son was four. She had the choice of not going, because she had no family member who could take the child. But she was determined to serve in Iraq and finally got her son's daycare provider to board him for the year, to her great relief.

Not all women I talked to celebrated this shift in importance from family to unit. Many women were disturbed by the way their deployments had attenuated the bonds they had with their children. Army Staff Sgt. Connica McFadden deployed with her husband when her baby, whom she was breast-feeding, was six months old. She returned a year later to find that her daughter did not recognize either of her parents, and cried when left alone with them. It took two months before their little girl would come home with her parents. Yet even as military life made motherhood difficult, motherhood was the reason many women gave for joining the armed services. Several women I interviewed had children with serious health problems. For them, joining the military was a way of getting good health insurance.

Many female combat vets are single mothers, and some judges have accepted the argument of military mothers' ex-husbands that women who deploy should have permanent custody transferred to the child's father, on the grounds that a mother's deployability inherently makes for a less stable family environment. Since one-third of deployed troops have kids at home, this has become an issue that fills the pages of military blogs and has drawn attention as well in such media outlets as the [Associated Press](#), [NPR](#) and [Good Housekeeping](#).

Apart from news stories about child custody issues related to deployment, though, there has been less media attention than one might expect relating to the issues of mothers in battle. But as the wars continue, and mothers continue to be deployed for long periods--returning, often, with physical and emotional injuries--it is more than likely that their stories will force us to reshape our cultural ideas about motherhood in general.

Laura Browder's fourth and most recent book is "When Janey Comes Marching Home: Portraits of Women Combat Veterans," a collaboration with photographer Sascha Pflaeging, for which she interviewed 52 women from all branches of the military. The Janey exhibit is on a national tour through fall 2011. Browder is the Tyler and Alice Haynes Professor of American Studies at the University of Richmond and is the writer and co-producer of a forthcoming documentary on PBS titled "Gone to Texas: The Lives of Forrest Carter." She is currently working on a documentary film based on Janey.

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